Planned Obsolescence: Publishing, Technology, and the Future of the Academy

http://mediacommons.futureofthebook.org/mcpress/plannedobsolescence

This talk is an overview of the project I've recently published online, entitled [title], ("overview" meaning it's mostly the introduction -- long on generalizations and polemics and a good bit shorter on evidence and detail, so I hope that the discussion afterward might bring some of that out).

the caveats

And a couple of ritual caveats before I start: though the project in full attempts to reach as broadly as it can, its primary focus in on publishing in the humanities, and particular in English, media studies, and related fields. And for that reason, what I'm mostly talking about in talking about "scholarly publishing" is book rather than journal publishing, though much of what follows still applies. But: I begin with two epigraphs:

"In many cases, traditions last not because they are excellent, but because influential people are averse to change and because of the sheer burdens of transition to a better state."
— Cass Sunstein, *Infotopia*

"There is no way to stop the shake-up of the university press system from happening. It has already begun."

— Lindsay Waters,

Enemies of Promise

obsolescence

This talk begins with the notion of obsolescence, a term that I was assigned as part of an MLA workshop in 2007, organized by the Committee on the Status of Graduate Students, entitled "Keywords for a Digital Profession." My argument in this presentation was that certain aspects of the ways we work as scholars are becoming obsolete, and that we need to understand this obsolescence clearly if the academy is going to thrive into the future. But this may not mean exactly what you think. Obsolescence is a catch-all term for a number of very different conditions, each of which, I'd argue, demands different kinds of analysis and response. Too often, we fall into a conventional association of obsolescence with the

death

"death" of this or that cultural form, which is a linkage that I argue needs to be broken, or at least complicated, if the academy is going to take full stock of its role in contemporary culture and fairly assess its means of producing and disseminating knowledge. For instance, the obsolescence that I focused on in my first book,

The Anxiety of Obsolescence

The Anxiety of Obsolescence: The American Novel in the Age of Television, is not, or at least not primarily,

material

material in nature; after all, neither the novel in particular, nor the book more broadly, nor print in general is "dead." My argument in The Anxiety of Obsolescence is, rather, that

claims about the obsolescence of cultural forms often say more about those doing the claiming than they do about the object of the claim

claims about the obsolescence of cultural forms often say more about those doing the claiming than they do about the object of the claim (something I'm trying to keep in mind as I talk to you today). In fact, agonized claims of the death of technologies like print and genres like the novel sometimes function to re-create an

elite

elite cadre of cultural producers and consumers, ostensibly operating on the margins of contemporary culture and profiting from their claims of marginality by creating a sense that their values, once part of a utopian mainstream and now apparently waning, must be protected. One might here think of the NEA's oft-cited reports,

Reading at Risk (2004)
To Read or Not to Read (2007)

Reading at Risk (2004) and To Read or Not to Read (2007). These anxious studies of the apparently precipitous decline of reading reveal themselves, on close reading, to be completely overdetermined, given how narrowly "reading" is defined in them: book-length printed and bound fiction and poetry consumed solely for pleasure -- how could reading not be on the decline?

Reading at Risk (2004)
To Read or Not to Read (2007)

Reading on the Rise (2009)

Which only makes the January 2009 release of Reading on the Rise that much more notable. This most recent, mostly underconsidered report doesn't fully acknowledge that it's expanded the definition of "reading," but it has. What it does note is the work that the NEA had done to "save" reading in the previous two reports seems to be working! All of this makes it almost embarrassingly obvious that the anxiety of the earlier reports was to some extent rhetorically calculated to create a kind of

cultural wildlife preserve

cultural wildlife preserve within which the apparently obsolete can flourish. My argument in The Anxiety of Obsolescence suggests that the kind of obsolescence proclaimed in reports like Reading at Risk may be less a material state than a

political project

political project, one aimed at intervening in contemporary culture to shore up a waning hierarchy.

I'm beginning this talk, which is ostensibly about my new project, by discussing my last project in no small part because of what happened once the manuscript was finished. Naively, I'd assumed that publishing a book that makes the argument that the book isn't dead wouldn't be that hard, that publishers might have some stake in ensuring that such an argument got into circulation. What I hadn't counted on, though, as I worked on the revisions prior to submitting the manuscript for review, was the effect that

dot-com crash

the first dot-com crash would have on university presses. In December 2003, almost exactly 72 hours after I'd found out that my college's cabinet had taken its final vote to grant me tenure, I received an email message from the editor of the scholarly press that had had the manuscript under review for the previous ten months. The news was not good: the press was declining to publish the book. The note, as encouraging as a rejection can ever be, stressed that in so far as fault could be attributed, it lay not with the manuscript but with the climate; the press had received two enthusiastically positive readers' reports, and the editor was supportive of the project. The marketing department, however, overruled him on the editorial board, declaring that the book posed

"too much financial risk... to pursue in the current economy"
— the marketing guys

"too much financial risk… to pursue in the current economy."

     This particular cause for rejection prompted two immediate responses, one of which was most clearly articulated by my mother, who said

"They were planning on making money off of your book?"

— Mom

"they were planning on making money off of your book?" The fact is, they were — not much, perhaps, but that the press involved needed the book to make money, at least enough to return its costs, and that it doubted it would, highlights one of the most significant problems facing academic publishing today:

insupportable economic model

an insupportable economic model. To backtrack for a second: that there is a problem in the first place is something that I'm assuming none of you need to be convinced of;

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Wednesday, March 10, 2010

Even Google can tell you that there's a "crisis in scholarly publishing," and organizations including the ACLS and the ARL, publishers such as Lindsay Waters and Bill Germano, scholars including Cathy Davidson and John Willinsky, and, perhaps most famously, past MLA president Stephen Greenblatt have been warning us for years that something's got to give. So of course the evidence for this crisis, and for the financial issues that rest at its heart, extends far beyond my own individual, anecdotal case.

In fact, though the problems in scholarly publishing have been building for decades (one might see, for instance,

The Crisis in Scholarly Communication

By Sanford G. Thatcher

DEBATES at academic meetings and in articles in the news media demonstrate that the "culture wars" are still under way in academe. But while those battles over the alleged politicization of scholarship continue to capture widespread attention, academics are overlooking a much more serious threat to the vitality of scholarship, one that signals a crisis for the whole system of scholarly communication.

The threat can be made plain by asking scholars, "Who buys the books you write'?" The answer in many fields is likely to be, "Only a few hundred people and libraries." And that is simply too few to allow scholarly presses to continue publishing the number of monographs they have published in the past - at least under the existing financial arrangements, which require presses to provide all the up-front publishing costs.

Let me give a quick example from a field in which the press I direct has long been active. Literary criticism has been at the center of many recent academic battles - over deconstruction, post-modernism, and the like - and last year saw the creation of the new Association for Literary Scholars and Critics, whose members say they will champion clear writing and try to bring the field back to the basics of textual criticism. But who is going to buy and read their books"

Our sales figures for works of literary criticism suggest that the answer is, fewer people than ever before. Since 1985, the Penn State Press has published 150 books of literary criticism, making it one of the leading scholarly publishers in this field. We cannot be sure exactly how many people have read those books, but we do know how many have bought them. Of the 150 titles, 65 per cent have sold fewer than 500 copies and 91 per cent have sold fewer than 800. Only 3 per cent (generally those dealing with American literature or gender issues) have sold more than 1,000 copies.

The market for books of traditional literary criticism has now shrunk to the point that it is no longer possible for a small, unendowed press like Penn State's to continue publishing such works. (The only exceptions for us will be a few series that we are contractually committed to publishing and the occasional book we can identify as having the potential to sell over 1,000 copies.) This is a sad admission for a publisher like me to make, as I have always believed it to be the primary mission of university presses to publish monographs. But, more important, it should be a signal that something is badly amiss in our system of scholarly communication, which relies on such publications to make the process of tenure and promotion work.

Data show that libraries - traditionally the market on which university presses rely the most - have reduced their purchases of monographs by 23 per cent since 1985. One reason is that an ever-increasing share of library budgets has been allocated to adding, or just sustaining, subscriptions to journals. This is especially so in the sciences, where 30,000 new journals were created in the 1980's and prices have

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Sandy Thatcher's 1995 assessment of "The Crisis in Scholarly Communication"), things suddenly got much, much worse after the dot–com bubble burst. During this dramatic turn in the stock market, when numerous university endowments took a nosedive (a situation that now seems like mere foreshadowing), two of the academic units whose budgets took the hardest hits were

university presses

university presses and

university libraries

university libraries. And the cuts in funding for libraries represented a further budget cut for presses, as numerous libraries, already straining under

rising costs of journals

the exponentially rising costs of journals, especially in the sciences, managed the cutbacks by reducing the number of monographs they purchased. The result for many university library users was perhaps only a slightly longer wait to obtain any book they needed, as libraries increasingly turned to consortial arrangements for

collection sharing

collection-sharing, but the result for presses was devastating.   Imagine: for a university press of the caliber of, say, Harvard's, the expectation for decades was that they could count on every library in the University of California system buying a copy of each title they published. Since 2001, however, the rule is increasingly that one library in the system will buy that title. And the same has happened with every such system around the country, such that, as Jennifer Crewe has noted, sales of monographs to libraries were less than

one-third

one-third of what they used to be -- and that was in 2004, well before the current crisis. So library cutbacks have resulted in vastly reduced sales for university presses, at precisely the moment when severe cutbacks in the percentage of university press budgets

subsidies

provided through institutional subsidies have made those presses dependent on income from sales for their survival. (The average university press receives well under 10% — usually closer to 5% — of its annual budget from its institution. And one can only imagine what will happen to that figure in the current economic climate.) It's for this reason that I argue that the financial model under which university press publishing operates is simply not sustainable into the future, and if we're waiting for a bailout, it's not coming. A foretaste of what is coming has been visible for a while now, as press after press has

reduced number of titles published

reduced the number of titles that it publishes each year, and as

marketing

marketing concerns have come at times, of necessity, to outweigh scholarly merit in making publication decisions.

In my case, things turned out well; the book got picked up (if only well over a year later) by a smaller press, one with a larger subsidy and thus more modest sales expectations, and the book has managed to exceed those expectations – and, ironically, to meet the requirements of that other press. But despite the fact that The Anxiety of Obsolescence was, finally, successfully published, my experience of

the crisis in academic publishing

the crisis in academic publishing led me to begin rethinking my argument about the book's continued viability. Perhaps there is a particular form of book, the academic book — or more specifically (given that marketing departments want known quantities)

the first academic book

the first academic book — that is indeed threatened with obsolescence. Even so, this is not to say that the first academic book is dead. First books are still published, after all, if not exactly in the numbers they might need to be in order to satisfy all our hiring and tenure requirements, and they still sell, if not exactly in the numbers required to support the presses that put them out. The first academic book is, however, in a curious state, one that I argued at the MLA might usefully trouble our associations of obsolescence with the "death" of this or that cultural form, for while the first academic book is

no longer viable

no longer viable,

but still required

it is still required. If anything, the first academic book isn't dead; it is

undead

undead. --- The suggestion that one particular type of book might be thought of as undead indicates that we need to rethink, in a broad sense, the relationship between old media and new, and ask what that relationship bodes for the academy. If the traditional model of academic publishing is not dead, but undead — again, not viable, but still required — how should we approach our work, and the publishing systems that bring it into being? There's of course a real question to be asked about how far we want to carry this metaphor; the suggestion that contemporary academic publishing is governed by a kind of

zombie

zombie logic, for instance, might be read as indicating that these old forms refuse to stay put in their graves, but instead walk the earth, rotting and putrescent, wholly devoid of consciousness, eating the brains of the living and susceptible to nothing but decapitation — and this might seem a bit of an over-response. On the other hand, it's worth considering the extensive scholarship in media studies on the figure of the zombie, which is often understood to act as a stand-in for the narcotized subject of capitalism, particularly at those moments when capitalism's contradictions become most apparent.

zombie?

If there is a relationship between the zombie and the subject of late capitalism, the cultural anxiety that figure marks is currently, with reason, off the charts – and not least within the academy, as we not only find our ways of communicating increasingly threatened with a sort of death-in-life, but also find our livelihoods themselves decreasingly lively, as the liberal arts are overtaken by the teaching of supposedly more pragmatic fields, as tenure-track faculty lines are rapidly being replaced with more contingent forms of labor, and as too many newly-minted PhDs find themselves without the job opportunities they need to survive.

really?

Just to be clear: I am not suggesting that the future survival of the academy requires us to put academic publishing safely in its grave. I'm not being wholly facetious either, though, as I do want to indicate that certain aspects of the academic publishing process are neither quite as alive as we'd like them to be, nor quite as dead as might be most convenient. It's likely that we could get along fine, for the most part, with the

undead

the undead of academic publishing, as studies of radio and the vinyl LP indicate that obsolete media forms have always had curious afterlives. But one key difference between those cases and the case of academic publishing, of course, is that we don't yet have a good replacement. It's thus important for us to consider the work that the book is and isn't doing for us, the ways that it remains vibrant and vital, and the ways that it has become undead, haunting the living from beyond the grave. --- But a few distinctions are necessary. The obsolescence faced by the first academic book is not, primarily,

material

material, any more than is the obsolescence of the novel; a radical shift to all-digital delivery would by itself do nothing to revive the form. However much I might insist that we in the humanities must move beyond our singular focus on

ink-on-paper

ink-on-paper to understand and take advantage of

pixels-on-screens

pixels-on-screens, the form of

print

print still functions perfectly well, and, in fact, numerous studies have indicated that a simple move to electronic distribution within the current system of academic publishing will not be enough to bail the system out, as printing, storing, and distributing the material form of the book only represents a

fraction

fraction of its current production costs. And, in fact, as many have pointed out,

digital

the digital may be more prone to a

material obsolescence

material obsolescence than is print. Take the obsolescence one encounters in attempting to read

Afternoon

Michael Joyce's Afternoon or

Victory Garden

Stuart Moulthrop's Victory Garden on a Mac these days, as Apple two years ago fully retired its support for

Classic

"Classic" mode with the advent, on the hardware side, of Intel-based processors that can't boot into OS 9, and on the software side, the release of OS 10.5, which eliminated Classic support for PowerPC machines as well. Couple this forward march of technology with the fact that Eastgate, the publisher of many of the most important first-generation hypertexts (including Afternoon and Victory Garden), has after eight-plus years still failed to release those texts in OS 10 native editions. Technologies move on, and technological formats

degrade

degrade, posing a set of dangers to digital textual futures that the Electronic Literature Organization has been working to bring into public view, both through its

"acid-free bits"

"acid–free bits" campaign and through its more recent work with the Library of Congress to

archive

archive digital literary texts. Without such active work to preserve electronic texts, and without the ongoing interest of and commitment by publishers, many digital texts face an obsolescence that is not at all theoretical, but instead very

material

material.
    But other kinds of digital texts experience a form of obsolescence that masks
unexpected

persistences

persistences. I'll point, by way of example, to my almost eight year old blog, which I named

Planned Obsolescence

Planned Obsolescence as a tongue-in-cheek jab at the fact that I'd just finished what seemed to be a long-term, durable project (the book), and was left with the detritus of many smaller ideas that demanded a kind of immediacy and yet seemed destined to fade away into nothingness. The blog is the perfect vehicle for such

ephemera

ephemera, as each post scrolls down the front page and off into the archives — and yet, the apparent ephemerality of the blog post bears within it a surprising

durability

durability, thanks both to the technologies of searching, filtering, and archiving that have developed across the web, as well as to the network of blog conversations that keep the

archives

archives in play. Blogs do die, often when their authors stop posting, sometimes when they're deleted. But even when apparently dead, a blog persists, in archives and caches, and accretes life around it, whether in the form of human visitors, drawn in by

Google

Google searches or links from other blogs, or

spam bots

spam bots, attracted like vermin to the apparently abandoned structure. A form of obsolescence may be engineered into a blog's architecture, but this ephemerality is misleading; our

interaction

interactions with blogs keep them alive long after they've apparently died.
    I want to hold up, alongside the interactions produced by blogs, the state of the first academic book, which I'd argue faces an obsolescence that is not primarily material but instead

institutional

institutional, arising from the environment in which it is produced. If, after all, there's something obsolete about the book, it's not its content; despite my general agreement with calls to decenter the book as the "gold standard" for tenure, and to place greater value on the publication of articles, there's a kind of large-scale synthetic work done in the form of the book that's still important to the development of scholarly thought. So the book's content isn't obsolete, but neither is the problem the book's form; the pages still turn just fine. What has ceased to function in the first academic book is the

system

system itself, the process through which the book comes into being. I mentioned earlier that the message I'd received from that press, declining my book on financial grounds, produced two immediate responses. The first was my mother's bewildered disbelief; the second came from my colleague Matt Kirschenbaum, who left a comment on Planned Obsolescence saying that he could not understand why I couldn't simply take the manuscript and the two positive readers' reports and put the whole thing online — voilà: peer-reviewed publication — where it would likely garner a readership both wider and larger than the same manuscript in print would.

"In fact I completely understand why that's not realistic, and I'm not seriously advocating it. Nor am I suggesting that we all become our own online publishers, at least not unless that's part of a continuum of different options. But the point is, the system's broken and it's time we got busy fixing it. What ought to count is peer review and scholarly merit, not the physical form in which the text is ultimately delivered."
— Matt Kirschenbaum

"In fact I completely understand why that's not realistic," he went on to say, "and I'm not seriously advocating it. Nor am I suggesting that we all become our own online publishers, at least not unless that's part of a continuum of different options. But the point is, the system's broken and it's time we got busy fixing it. What ought to count is peer review and scholarly merit, not the physical form in which the text is ultimately delivered" (Kirschenbaum 12.16.03).

This exchange with Matt, and a number of other conversations that I had in the ensuing months, convinced me to stop thinking about

scholarly publishing

scholarly publishing as a system that would simply bring my work into being, and instead approach it as the object of that work, thinking seriously about both the institutional models and the material forms through which scholarship might best circulate. I began, in early 2004, to discuss in a fairly vague way the possibility of founding an all-electronic scholarly press, but it took a while for anything more concrete to emerge. What got things started was a December 2005 report by

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DEC. 30, 2005

Radical Change for Tenure

Three years ago, all members of the Modern Language Association received a letter from Stephen Greenblatt, then the group's president, warning of a crisis facing language and literature departments. Junior faculty members were unable to publish the books that they needed to win tenure and cuts in library and university press budgets left open the possibility that higher education "stands to lose, or at least severely to damage, a generation of young scholars."

He called for academic departments to rethink the way they considered publication as a tenure requirement, and his letter set off considerable debate.

Thursday night, a special panel of the MLA offered the first glimpse at its plan to overhaul tenure — and in many ways the plans go well beyond the reforms Greenblatt proposed. As he suggested, the panel wants departments — including those at top research universities

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the online journal Inside Higher Ed on the work that had been done to that point by an MLA task force on the evaluation of scholarship for tenure and promotion, and on the multiple recommendations thus far made by the panel. At the request of the editors of The Valve, a widely-read literary studies focused blog, I wrote a lengthy consideration of the recommendations made by this panel, and extended one of those recommendations to reflect one possible future, in the hopes of opening up a larger conversation about where academic publishing ought to go, and how we might best take it there.

Many of the recommendations put forward by the MLA task force (which were of course later expanded upon in the task force's final report, published in December 2006) were long in coming, and many stand to change tenure processes for the better; these recommendations include calls for departments:

clarify tenure standards to new hires via "memorandums of understanding"

-- to clarify the communication of tenure standards to new hires via "memorandums of understanding";

consider articles published by tenure candidates as seriously as books

-- to give serious consideration to articles published by tenure candidates, thus, as I noted, decentering the book as the gold standard of scholarly production, and to communicate that expanded range of acceptable venues for publication to their administrations;

change the selection and instruction of outside evaluators in tenure reviews

-- to handle the selection and instruction of outside evaluators in tenure cases in ways more appropriate to the candidate's institution; and, perhaps most importantly, at least for my purposes,

acknowledge and fairly evaluate online scholarship

to acknowledge that scholarship of many different varieties is taking place online, and to evaluate that scholarship without media-related bias.

These were of course extremely important recommendations, but there was a significant degree of

easier said than done

"easier said than done" in the responses that these recommendations, and particularly the last one, received, and for no small reason: these recommendations require a substantive rethinking not simply of the processes through which the academy tenures its faculty, but in how those faculty do their work, how they communicate that work, and how that work is read both inside and outside the academy. Those changes cannot simply be technological; they must be both social and institutional. And thus the two projects I've been working on since, both aimed at creating the kinds of change I think necessary for the survival of scholarly publishing in the humanities into the twenty-first century.

MediaCommons

The first of these is MediaCommons, a digital scholarly publishing network focused on media studies, which I have been working on with the support of the Institute for the Future of the Book, an NEH Digital Start-Up Grant, and the NYU Digital Library Technology Services group.

media commons
a digital scholarly network

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The Rise of the Landscape Web
by **Kathleen Fitzpatrick** — Pomona College
October 04, 2009 – 13:08

I've noticed over the last couple of months that several of my favorite websites were becoming, well, wide. It's become increasingly common, in fact, for me to find myself scrolling sideways as well as up-and-down when out there browsing, and frankly, it was getting to be a bit annoying.

But with my entry (yes, at last!) into the ranks of those who are getting to play with the Google Wave preview ⧉, it hit me: the fundamental orientation of the web is changing. And Wave may well cement that change. **... read more »**

Capitalism: A Love Story
by **Chuck Tryon** — Fayetteville State University
October 03, 2009 – 14:12

For nearly two decades, Michael Moore has built a career out of staging confrontations between himself, as representative of the poor and working-class populations, and the incredibly rich. Moore's trademark baseball caps, blue jeans, and his Everyman physique have fed into a public persona meant to expose the limits of capitalist exploitation and political manipulation. However, as Moore's street theater antics, which often involve being barred from entering steel-and-glass skyscrapers by bemused security guards, have become increasingly predictable, they have

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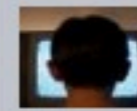"Is This My New TV?": Divides in ... by Caryn Murphy

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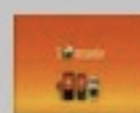
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MediaCommons is working to become a space in which the multiplicity of conversations in and about media studies taking place online can be brought together, through projects like "In Syndication," which aggregates a number of blogs in the field, but we're also publishing a range of original projects, the longest-running of which is

In Media Res, which asks five scholars a week to comment briefly on some up-to-the-minute media text as a means of opening discussion about the issues it presents for media scholars, students, practitioners, and activists. We hope to foster that discussion as part of a much broader scholarly ecosystem, understanding that the ideas we circulate range in heft from the blog post through the article to the monograph. And so we're publishing those longer forms as well, through

http://mediacommons.futureofthebook.org/mcpress

MediaCommons Press. In this project, we're publishing longer texts for open discussion, some of which are moving through the digital phase on their way to a primary life in print (within the next few weeks, in that category, we'll be conducting an experiment in open review on behalf of Shakespeare Quarterly, for their forthcoming special issue on Shakespeare and New Media). Other projects are meant to have a primary digital existence, including a series of television studies "case files" that we hope to launch later this spring.

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a digital scholarly network

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In Media Res activity

Plan
Working on the revisions of
Planned Obsolescence
More about me

Preparing for my UM talk.
February 17, 2010 – 19:38

Activity

February 17, 2010 - 17:04
kfitz tweeted "@GeorgeOnline Gallagher & Greenblatt on the potato in the materialist imagination." 5:04pm#
kfitz tweeted "DirectTV + winter Olympics = mighty pleasant flight!" 4:45pm#

February 16, 2010 - 22:28
kfitz tweeted "@ambrose_mensch I think they may just be counting how many people are cancelling because of the fee; he didn't try to sell me on staying." 10:28pm#
kfitz tweeted "@cscannella Dunno - looks that way. They waive the fee if you spend more than $2400/yr with them, but it's a secondary card for me, so no." 10:24pm#
kfitz tweeted "@alicejrobison Back atcha!" 10:13pm#

1 2 ... next › last »

Publications

Planned Obsolescence
My Secret Life
Even Nearer
The Stakes of Disciplinarity
The Legacy of David Foster Wallace
#MLA09
Not Exactly the Tip of the Tongue
Peer Review as Dialogue
UM/HASTAC Publication Prize
Gee, Time Warner, Thanks for Asking
December!

more

MediaCommons Content
Happy New Year from MediaCommons
6 weeks 4 days
MLA Panel: Media Studies

Wednesday, March 10, 2010

But the primary importance of MediaCommons, as far as I'm concerned, is the network it aims to build among scholars in the field, getting those scholars in communication with one another, discussing and possibly collaborating with one another. To that end, we've built a peer network backbone for the system –– Facebook for scholars, if you like. Through this profile system, scholars can gather together the writing they're doing across the web, as well as citations for offline work, creating a digital portfolio that provides a snapshot of their scholarly identities.

MediaCommons

Working on this project has taught me several things that I sort of knew already, but hadn't fully internalized, one of which is that any software development project will inevitably take far longer than you could possibly predict at the outset, and the second, and most important, is that no matter how slowly such software development projects move, the rate of change within the academy is positively glacial in comparison.

Planned Obsolescence

And it's my need to advocate for such change that has led to the other project, the one I'm mostly talking about today. For while there have been numerous publications in the last few years that have argued for the need for new systems and practices in scholarly publishing, including, just to name two,

John Willinsky, *The Access Principle*

Christine Borgman, *Scholarship in the Digital Age*

John Willinsky's The Access Principle and Christine Borgman's Scholarship in the Digital Age, these arguments too often fail to account for the fundamentally

conservative

conservative nature of academic institutions and — the rhetoric of a David Horowitz notwithstanding — the similar conservatism of the academics that comprise them. In the main, we're extraordinarily resistant to change in our ways of working; it is not without reason that a senior colleague once joked to me that the motto of our institution (one that might usefully be extended to the academy as a whole) could well be

We Have Never Done It That Way Before

"we have never done it that way before." As Donald Hall has noted,

"While we are very adept at discussing the texts of novels, plays, poems, film, advertising, and even television shows, we are usually very reticent, if not wholly unwilling, to examine the textuality of our own profession, its scripts, values, biases, and behavioral norms."

— Donald Hall

scholars often resist applying the critical skills that we bring to our subject matter to an examination of "the textuality of our own profession, its scripts, values, biases, and behavioral norms" (Hall xiv). This kind of

self-criticism

self-criticism is a risky endeavor, and those of us who have been privileged enough to succeed within the existing system are often reluctant to bite the hand that feeds us. Changing our technologies, changing our ways of doing research, changing our modes of production and distribution of the results of that research, are all crucial to the continued vitality of the academy —

change

and yet none of those changes can possibly come about unless there is first a profound change in the ways of thinking of scholars themselves. Until scholars really believe that publishing on the web is as valuable as publishing in print — and more importantly, until they believe that their institutions believe it, too — few will be willing to risk their careers on a new way of working, with the result that that new way of working will remain marginal, undervalued, and risky.

In Planned Obsolescence, then, I am focusing not just on the technological changes that many believe are necessary to allow academic publishing to flourish into the future, but on

social, intellectual and institutional change

the social, intellectual, and institutional changes that are necessary to pave the way for such flourishing. In order for new modes of communication to become broadly accepted within the academy, scholars and their institutions must take a new look at the mission of the university, the goals of scholarly publishing, and the processes through which scholars conduct their work. We must collectively consider what new technologies have to offer not us, not just in terms of

cost
access

the cost of publishing or access to publications (though these are huge issues that must be contended with)

the ways we research

but in the ways we research,

the ways we write

the ways we write,

the ways we review

and the ways we review.

peer review

And it's the structures of peer review that I argue we need to begin with, not least because over the course of developing MediaCommons, in the dozens of meetings and conferences and panel discussions that I've participated in, every single conversation has come back, again and again, to one question: "what are you going to do about peer review?" I've said that peer review threatens to become the axle around which the whole issue of electronic scholarly publishing gets wrapped, choking the life out of many innovative systems before they are fully able to establish themselves.

peer review

And no wonder, I suppose; concerns about peer review are quite understandable, given that it is in some sense the sine qua non of the academy. We employ it in almost every aspect of the ways that we work, from hiring decisions through promotion and tenure reviews, in both internal and external grant and fellowship competitions, and, of course, in publishing. The work we do as scholars is repeatedly subjected to a series of vetting processes that enable us to indicate that the results of our work have been scrutinized by authorities in the field, and that those results are therefore themselves authoritative.

but

But I also want to suggest that the current system of peer review is in fact part of what's broken. There's a rather extraordinary literature available, mostly in the sciences and social sciences, on the problems with conventional peer review, including its biases and its flaws. Each and every one of us, I'd be willing to bet, has had direct, personal experience of those flaws -- the review that misses the point, the review that must be personally motivated, the review that seems to be about someone else's work entirely, or perhaps worst, the review that we never even get to see. And for such an imperfect system, peer review as we know it requires an astonishing amount of labor on our part, for which we never receive "credit." And thus when Matt Kirschenbaum says that

"What ought to count is peer review and scholarly merit, not the physical form in which the text is ultimately delivered."

[read quote], I agree, but at the same time feel quite strongly that the system of peer review that we know today could be vastly improved -- it's too often a backchannel conversation taking place between editor and reviewer that excludes the author from its benefits, and it too often impedes rather than assists in the circulation of ideas. For that reason, I want to force us to take a closer look at what we mean when we say peer review, what it is we expect peer review to do, and how such processes might work in a digitally networked structure, in order to make sure that we're not installing a broken part in a new machine.

   One of the problems with using our current model of peer review in digital publishing is a fundamental misalignment between the net-native means through which "authority" is determined online and

disciplinary

the disciplinary structures that have grown up around peer review. I use the term "disciplinary" here in a decidedly Foucauldian sense; despite the conventional wisdom that peer review was born out of the 18th century editorial practices of Philosophical Transactions, the journal of the Royal Society of London, Mario Biagioli has persuasively argued that peer review's deep roots are in fact in 16th and 17th century royal

censorship

censorship practices, which restricted the legal sale of printed texts to licensed publishers. The enforcement of this mode of state censorship, employed to prevent sedition or heresy, was later delegated to the royal academies through the imprimatur granted them at the time of their founding. In this sense, the origin of "peer review" indicates an early ambiguity between review by one's peers and review by a peer of the realm. Gradually, scholarly societies facilitated a transition in scientific peer review from state censorship

self-policing

to self-policing, introducing a degree of autonomy but simultaneously becoming, in the Foucauldian sense,

disciplinary technology

a disciplinary technology, creating the conditions of possibility for the academic disciplines that it authorizes. Moreover, as Biagioli notes, peer review is a particularly self-perpetuating disciplinary technology as, unlike Foucault's examples of the prison or the mental hospital, the successfully disciplined are gradually given the authority to discipline others.

The problem with transferring this disciplinary technology to the networked world is, in no small part, that the network has its own technologies. The placement of conventional peer review prior to selection for publication in the traditional print-based process indicates that it serves a primarily

gatekeeping

gatekeeping function, one that allows certain kinds of academic discourse to thrive while excluding other kinds from the realm of the thinkable. Such gatekeeping is arguably necessary in print, in order to allow publishers and editors to cope with the scarcities of print's economics -- only so many pages, in so many books and journals, can be published each year. In the digital, however, as publishers including Michael Jensen of the National Academies Press have pointed out,

scarcity is over

scarcity is over. Because anyone can publishing anything online — and, from a perspective that values the free and open communication of the products of scholarly research, not only can but should — we face instead a extraordinary

plenitude

plenitude. And thus, in the part of this project that focuses on peer review, I argue that what the digital humanities must develop is not a means of applying the current system of peer review to new modes of digital publishing in order to

create artificial scarcity

create artificial scarcity, but rather a means of

coping with abundance

coping with abundance, of working within a living system of scholarly communication. Peer review needs to be transformed from the current, closed gatekeeping system into

post-publication

an open post-publication system that doesn't determine

whether a text should be published

whether a text should be published but rather measures

how it has been (and should be) received

how it has been (and how it should be) received, what its place in the ecosystem of scholarly communication is, and what kinds of responses it has provoked. The center of gravity of peer review thus needs to be shifted

from regulation to communication

from regulation to communication, transforming it into a mechanism for

facilitating

facilitating more fluid and productive exchanges amongst peers -- and, not at all incidentally, a system in which the work of reviewing itself becomes visible as work, and the reviews themselves become part of the scholarly record.

What I argue is that we need to develop a system of

"peer-to-peer review"

"peer-to-peer review," one that takes advantage of networked publishing's capacity for discussion and dialogue, as well as of what Michael Jensen has called

"new metrics of scholarly authority" (Jensen)

the "new metrics of scholarly authority" -- things like hits and downloads, of course, but also comments and inbound links, which reveal how web-based texts get used -- in order to provide a post-publication mode of filtering the wealth of content that should be made available via networked publishing. After all,

scarcity

scarcity does linger in internet-based communication — it's just that, for the most part, what has become scarce is time and attention, rather than the materials of production. What internet-based scholarly publishing requires is not gatekeepers (a position antithetical to the web's own technologies) but filters, systems that allow a community of scholars working with and responding to one another to set and maintain their own standards, helping one another find the best work being produced in their fields.

Planned Obsolescence

It's not the nineteenth century anymore, and it may be too late for the world to be changed with a book.

– Maria Bustillos

There's a delicious ambiguity in that sentence: is it too late for a book — the literal, physical object — to change the world, or is it too late for any textual form? This text isn't yet a book, though it's headed in that direction. And possible or not, it's determined to change the world, or at least the small segment of it where our colleges and universities reside.

And it's attempting to begin creating that change here, with this site. One of the points that this text argues hardest about is the need to reform peer review for the digital age, insisting that peer review will be a more productive, more helpful, more transparent, and more effective process if conducted in the open. And so here's the text, practicing what it preaches, available online for open review.

I'll be relying on these reviews in revising the manuscript before its final submission. If all goes according to plan, the book will be forthcoming from NYU Press, which is sending the manuscript out for blind review as well. I'm grateful to those anonymous readers, and will certainly take

Wednesday, March 10, 2010

So, while Planned Obsolescence is headed for print – it'll be published either late this year or early next by NYU – as a means of attempting to put my money (at least metaphorically) where my mouth is, I've put the entire text online for open review. It hasn't been a perfect process, but it's been exciting – I've been able to discuss the text at a much earlier stage than I would have before, and I've had reviewers discussing the text with one another, disagreeing on points of assessment. And I also know a lot of things about the text. For instance:

21000+ pageloads
7800+ first-time visitors
2200+ return visitors
280 comments
39 commenters

I know that in the four and a half months since the project launched, it's had over 21000 pageloads; over 7800 unique visitors have come by for the first time, and over 2200 of them have come back; 39 unique commenters have left a total of 280 comments. And the project has been written about and linked to in at least 20 venues that I've found.

400

And I want to place that alongside the fact that the average scholarly press monograph in the humanities sells fewer than 400 copies over its lifetime.

"publication"

But this review process produces some complications, not least for our notion of what publication is, and what purposes it serves. Has my book now been "published"? When NYU releases the revised version, will that be a second edition? What will the status of the online version of the text be once the print version is out? And what is the relationship between the readers' comments and the text that is ostensibly mine? A broadly implemented peer-to-peer review system will inevitably require us to think in new ways about

authorship

authorship, in no small part because a turn from pre-publication review to post-publication review (or, as in my case, review as itself a mode of publication) will almost certainly necessitate a turn from thinking about academic publishing as a system focused on the production and dissemination of individual

products

products to imagining a system focused more broadly on facilitating the

processes

processes of scholarly work, as the time and effort required to maintain a community-oriented, gift-economy-driven system of peer-to-peer review will require that scholars (much like the developers of large-scale open-source software projects) place some portion of their primary emphasis not on their own individual achievements, but rather on the advancement of the

community

community as a whole. Such collectivity is a utopian ideal, of course, and to a significant degree, it goes against our training as scholars, and particularly as scholars within the humanities; what we accomplish, we accomplish alone. Or so it appears, at least. In the chapter in which I reconsider authorship within digital networked publishing structures, I argue, using the example of blogs, that what we are leaving behind, if anything, is not the individual voice or the individual achievement, but instead the illusion fostered by print that such the author's voice is ever fully alone. Roland Barthes, of course, claimed back in 1967 that

"We know now that a text consists not of a line of words, released a single 'theological' meaning (the 'message' of the Author-God), but of a multi-dimensional space in which are married and contested several writings, none of which is original: the text is a fabric of quotations, resulting from a thousand sources of culture."

— Roland Barthes

no text is a single "line of words," but that each instead is a "multi-dimensional space in which are married and contested several writings, none of which is original: the text is a fabric of quotations" (Barthes 52–53). We have long acknowledged the death of the author, in theory, at least — but we haven't thought much about what such a proclamation might mean for our own status as authors, and I doubt any of us are willing to part with the lines on the CV that are the result of our authorship.

interaction

I'm certainly not arguing that we'll have to, but I do want to suggest that digital networks, as structures that facilitate interaction, communication, and interconnection, will require us to think differently about what it is we're doing as we write. As the example of the blog might suggest, communities best engage with one another around writing that is open rather than closed, in process rather than concluded. If we were to shift our focus in the work we're doing as authors from the moment of completion, from the self-contained product, to privilege instead the

process

process of writing, discussion, and revision, we'd likely begin to "publish" work -- in the sense of making it public in readable form -- earlier in its development (at the conference paper stage, for instance) and to remain engaged with those texts much longer after they've been released to readers. Though this idea makes many scholars nervous, about getting "scooped," about getting too much feedback too soon, about letting the messiness of our processes be seen, about the prospect of never being fully "done" with a project, it's worth considering why we're doing the work in the first place: to the degree that scholarship is about participating in an exchange of ideas with one's peers, new networked publishing structures can facilitate that interaction, but will best do so if the discussion is ongoing, always in process.

dialogue

This foregrounding of conversation, however, may likely also require authors who are in dialogue with their readers, who are of course themselves also authors, to be prepared to relinquish a certain degree of control over their texts, letting go of the illusion that their work springs wholly from the individual intelligence and acknowledging the ways that scholarship, even in fields in which sole authorship is the norm, has always been

collaborative

collaborative. (We resist this, of course; as Lisa Ede and Andrea Lunsford have pointed out, no matter how much we claim to value the collective or collaborative, our profoundly individualistic sense of accomplishment is proven by the literally unthinkable nature of the multi-author dissertation.) Sometimes the result of these new conversational publishing practices might be productive co-authoring relationships, but it need not always be so; we may instead need to develop new citational practices that acknowledge the participation of our peers in the development of our work. Along the way, though, we'll also need to think differently about

originality

"originality" in scholarly production, recognizing that, in a networked environment in which more and more discourse is available, some of the most important work that we will do as scholars may more closely resemble contemporary editorial or curatorial practices, bringing together and highlighting and

remix

remixing significant ideas in existing texts rather than remaining solely focused on the production of more ostensibly original text. We must find ways for the new modes of authorship that digital networks will no doubt facilitate — process-centered, collaborative, remix-oriented — to "count" within our systems of valuation and priority.

There are many other such changes that will be required throughout the entire academic community if such new publishing practices are to take root:

publishers

publishers, for instance, will need to think differently about their business models (which may need to focus more on services and less on objects), about their editorial practices (which may require a greater investment in guiding the development of projects from an early stage), about the structures of texts (which may become less linear and will undoubtedly become less uniformly "textual"), about their ownership and uses of copyright, and about their role in facilitating conversation;

libraries

they'll also need to think in concert with libraries about archival and preservation practices, ensuring that the texts produced today remain available and accessible tomorrow.

universities

And universities, in the broadest sense, will need to rethink the relationship between the library, the university press, the information technology center, and the academic units within the institution, reimagining the funding model under which publishing operates and the institutional purposes that such publishing serves — but also, and crucially, reimagining the relationship between the academic institution and the surrounding culture. As new systems of networked

knowledge production

knowledge production become increasingly prevalent and influential online, the university, and the scholars who comprise it, need to find ways to adapt those systems to our needs, or we will run the risk of becoming increasingly irrelevant to the ways that contemporary culture produces and communicates authority.

In the end, what I am arguing is that we in the academy today face what is less a

obsolescence

material obsolescence than an institutional one; we are caught in entrenched systems that no longer serve our needs. But because we are, by and large, our institutions, or rather, because they are us, the greatest challenge we face is not that obsolescence, but our

response

response to it. Like the novelists I studied, who feel their cultural centrality threatened by the rise of newer media forms, we can shore up the boundaries between ourselves and the open spaces of intellectual exchange on the internet; we can extol the virtues of the ways things have always been done; we can bemoan our marginalization in a culture that continues marching forward into the digital future — and in so doing, we can further undermine our influence on the main threads of intellectual discussion in contemporary public life. We can build supports for an

undead

undead system, and we can watch the profession itself become undead.

the hopey-changey part

Or we can work to change the ways we communicate and the systems through which we attribute value to such communication, opening ourselves to the possibility that new modes of publishing might enable not just more texts but better texts, not just an evasion of obsolescence but a new

emergence

emergence for scholarship. The point, finally, is not whether any one particular technology can provide a viable future, but whether we have the institutional will to commit to the development of the systems that will make such a technology viable, and keep it and ourselves viable into the future.

thanks!

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